

# paper or plastic? your gifts, her headache

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What if you could wrap up all your holiday shopping simply by picking up the phone?

What if once you made your list and checked it twice, you never had to step foot near a mall? You wouldn't even have to get in the car to sit in holiday traffic or navigate snowy streets.

It may seem as sweet as a vision of sugar plum fairies, but Michelle Sterling can make these Christmas wishes come true, but it will cost you.

For \$135 an hour, Sterling will take care of all your holiday shopping. She's been a personal shopper and consultant for 10 years. Three years ago Sterling launched her own company, the Global Image Group, which now has offices in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Miami, London and Hong Kong.

Though her services don't come cheap, for most of her clients it's just a drop in the bucket.

Sterling targets executives who rake in more \$100,000 a year as her prime customers. These bigwigs have the means, but not the time, to put together some fabulous holiday presents. So Sterling takes care of the details for them.

Hiring a personal shopper for the season doesn't mean you get to shirk all responsibility though. Sterling isn't a mind reader — her clients still need to get a list together.

It all starts with a phone call where Sterling puts her clients through an interview process. She asks several questions, including: 1) Who the client is buying for; 2) What's the price range,



Michelle Sterling launched the Global Image Group, with offices around the globe. For \$135 an hour, her staff will pick up all the gifts you need for everyone on your shopping list. Ahhhh ... paying someone to shop for you ... we thought it was the thought that counted.

and 3) What type of gift they are looking for — sentimental, platonic, a business gift, or a gift for a loved one.

To find the perfect gift, Sterling fishes for details about the gift recipient.

Since it's usually a wife or mother, Sterling asks specific questions about her lifestyle. "What does she like to do for fun?" Sterling asks. "Does she have children? Is she a homemaker? Does she work for a major corporation?"

Though she can help point clients in the right direction, Sterling says "it's really on the client to do enough research to know their wife's needs. There's a certain amount of accountability the client needs to take."

Her clients also need to get the timing right. "Men particularly are culprits of last-minute shopping," Sterling says. "They will buy the day before it needs to be there, and we're not responsible for that."

To avoid the last-minute rush, Sterling takes time and care to get the details right ahead of time. Plus, there's a lot of money on the line when it comes to these gifts. Sterling figures her clients usually spend between \$500 to \$1,000 on their mom, another \$500 to \$1,000 on their wife, and \$100 to \$400 on corporate gifts.

And the list doesn't end there; finding gifts for the kids can add up too. Sterling says, "It depends on their age and who they are and how spoiled they are," but the price ranges from \$100 to \$1,000 per child.

Lastly, Sterling considers the type of gift. "Gifts are tailored to individuals," she says. "There's no set list of the classic five gifts. We try to make this a personal touch service so the individual is happy with the gift. So we're sort of coaches to help them (the clients) figure out the best gift."

To do that, Sterling comes up with a list of options for each person on their list, gets approval from her client, then does all the ordering, and has the gifts shipped right to the client's doorstep — be it work or home.

The client sits back and lets Sterling do the dirty work.

"If they want a particular bracelet from Cartier, but Cartier only made 500 of them and they don't have time to call every store in the nation, we make the calls for them, find the item and take care of everything."

That doesn't mean Sterling ever has to leave the office though. Online shopping is a beautiful thing, and Sterling takes advantage of it to help save her customers time and money.

"If you have to go out to the stores, it's going to take longer," she says, and since she charges by the hour those \$135 fees can add up quickly.

"Clients aren't going to be happy just because you can shop until you drop for an hour," Sterling says. It's

#### Holiday shopping tip from Sterling:

"Overstock.com or eBay have some good deals for the holidays, even good ole Target. For bargains, those are the websites to refer to," Sterling suggests.

For shopping on a more luxurious budget, as Sterling does for her clients, she recommends checking out the websites [www.neimanmarcus.com](http://www.neimanmarcus.com), [www.saksfifthavenue.com](http://www.saksfifthavenue.com), and [www.macys.com](http://www.macys.com).

Salvatore Ferragamo and Cartier that she can rely on.

"It was a \$48,000 necklace from Cartier. There were very few of them made," Sterling says of one of her ultimate gift purchases. The platinum necklace was made of several colors and semiprecious stones. "It went really well the individual," she says. "It accentuated her features and went with her lifestyle."

If Sterling can charge her clients \$135 an hour to shop for their gifts, and can find an amazing gift for a person she doesn't even know, you can only imagine how well her presents must go over with her family at the holidays.

But when it comes to her own shopping, Sterling doesn't change her professional strategy. "I'm very quick," she says. "I just ask them what they want and go out and get it. It takes me about an hour to do all my shopping. If I can't do it in that time for myself, I certainly can't do it for my clients."

